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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 002865

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/25/2016

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: INDEPENDENT INQUIRY COMMISSION REPORT TO
BE SUBMITTED - CONCLUDES 193 CIVILIANS DEAD, NO USE OF
EXCESSIVE FORCE BY GOE

REF: ADDIS ABABA 02522

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with Mekonnen Dilgasa, head of the Independent Inquiry Commission, Charge and Staffdel Phelan sought insight into the commission's official findings and the conditions surrounding submission of the final report in light of two previous commission members having sought asylum abroad. The meeting with Mekonnen was arranged by Ethiopian Ambassador Samuel Assefa to provide Charge a briefing on the official IIC report, which is due to be publicly released during the coming week. The meeting provided Charge and Staffdel Phelan an opportunity, prior to the report being officially released, to probe about possible discrepancies between the official report and the allegedly leaked IIC documents that were published on the internet. Mekonnen explained that, contrary to media reports, no previous report existed but that some of the documents that have been leaked are in fact legitimate. He said that the final report concludes that while 193 people were killed in the clashes between security forces and protesters in June and November 2005, excessive force was not used. Mekonnen said he does not know why the two former commission members fled the country, but that their reports of pressure by the GoE to influence the commission's findings are not true) they had full cooperation from the government. The commission members will address the media on October 26 and they will appear before the Parliament on October 30. (Note: After the Commission meets with the press, scheduled for October 26, this cable can be declassified and marked as sensitive, but unclassified. End Note.) END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On October 25, Charge, together with Senate staffer Michael Phelan and Poloff (note taker), met with the acting Chairman of the Independent Inquiry Commission, Mekonnen Dilgasa. Mekonnen was accompanied by the Ethiopian Ambassador to the United States, Samuel Assefa. The Independent Inquiry Commission (IIC) was established by Parliament to investigate the civic unrest and related violence that took place in Addis Ababa and other urban areas in Ethiopia in June and November 2005.

CHAIRMAN BY DEFAULT

13. (C) Mekonnen took over the IIC Chairmanship after the previous Chairman and Deputy Chairman, Frehiwot Samuel and Wolde-Michael Meshesa, left Ethiopia reportedly to seek asylum in Germany. Following their departure, there have

been reports in the media, stemming from interviews with Wolde-Michael, that a version of the report had been agreed upon in July (prior to Frehiwot and Wolde-Michael's departure) that identified 193 deaths resulting from the violence, and that the GoE had used excessive force (reftel).

Wolde-Michael said in his interview that the clashes were &similar to a massacre⁸ and that he fled Ethiopia to &tell the truth about the commission's findings.⁸ Frehiwot has not yet publicly discussed the work of the IIC or his reported asylum request.

CONTEXT SWINGS THE VOTE

14. (C) In discussing the work of the IIC prior to submission of the official report, Mekonnen said that, in fact, there had been no previously completed report, as suggested in the media. He confirmed that the document published online that outlined the name of each of the dead as well and the cause of death are legitimate though. He reported that it was using this document that the IIC held its first vote on whether the GoE used excessive force. However, at that time they did not have the "qualitative information" or "context" that was ultimately used to complete the final report; rather they had only the "quantitative data" on the number of dead. He acknowledged that for that vote, 8 of the 10 members voted that excessive force was used, while 2 (including Mekonnen) voted that it was not used. Since the time of that vote, and over the course of the IIC's work, Mekonnen said that they had made many "subdecisions" on various aspects of the findings. However, until the final decision in September, none of the previous votes considered the qualitative and

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contextual information, which includes the extent of provocation by the protesters, the variety of weapons they used, and the resulting threat faced by the police during the clashes. The final vote concluded that excessive force was not used, which is stated in the report. He said that vote was 8-0 for such a conclusion. Mekonnen pointed out though that the report contains a number of suggestions for the GoE, as well as incidents the IIC recommend should be investigated further. An official English version of the report will be made available soon.

SOME LEAKED INFO LEGITIMATE, NO REASON FOR 2 TO FLEE

15. (C) Charge and Staffdel Phelan asked Mekonnen about possible discrepancies between what was released on the internet and what was finally issued in the report. Mekonnen said that there is no difference and that the 193 deaths they found to be a result of the clashes are in the report. (NOTE: This amount is in excess of the previous GoE accounts, which put the dead closer to 50. END NOTE) When asked about the difference between the GoE's previous reports on the number of dead and the IIC's, Mekonnen said that the GoE likely did not have the same access as the IIC and that the "situation was not conducive" to a proper investigation by the government. He went on to say that, as a result of interviewing GoE officials, family members of the dead, reviewing death certificates from the city records, and requesting input from Parliamentarians, the IIC received nearly 3,400 documents, all of which will be submitted as supporting evidence of their report. Mekonnen also acknowledged that much of the work was videotaped and that transcripts were made, which may have been leaked by Frehiwot or Wolde-Michael.

16. (C) Mekonnen told Charge and Staffdel Phelan that he does not know why Frehiwot and Wolde-Michael fled the country. He said that during their time working together on the IIC, neither reported receiving death threats or displeasure with their position on the commission. Mekonnen added that the

IIC had not received pressure from the GoE to alter the report, as reported. Contrarily, he said they received full cooperation from all officials, including the Addis Ababa Police Commissioner and PM Meles Zenawi. He dismissed reports that the IIC offices had been surrounded by security officials, the electricity being cut off, and other alleged means of GoE intimidation. He did say though that it has been difficult on all IIC members due to pressure from friends and family. He explained that many have received accusations of working for the GoE and charges that they are not independent. He maintains that he is neutral and that, despite this pressure, he and the remaining 8 members felt a duty to their country to complete their work, no matter how difficult. He suggested that Frehiwot and Wolde-Michael perhaps eventually succumbed to this pressure, leading to their fleeing the country. Nonetheless, Mekonnen expressed disappointment that his fellow IIC members would violate their code of ethics and leak information about the report to the media before the official submission of the report.

COMMENT: HARD WORK FOR MEKONNEN AND GOE TO CONTINUE

17. (C) During the meeting Mekonnen was clearly conscious of being "on the record" for his comments and hesitant to speak for fellow commission members, but nonetheless provided a great deal of insight into the commission's processes. He also confirmed and dispelled various information that has been published on the internet regarding the IIC's findings and the alleged pressure from the GoE. On the surface, Mekonnen comes across as the neutral person he claims to be, critical of some government action, while also denouncing the actions taken by the protesters. He seemed exhausted by the work that IIC entailed, and appeared to be emotionally hurt by the harassment from friends and family he received. He also was clearly not looking forward to facing questioning by the press and Parliamentarians. There is sure to be a great deal of skepticism about the findings of the IIC and the report's conclusions because of the leaked video and corresponding transcript. Yet the final report conclusions,

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except for that of excessive force, are similar. A good job has been done to ensure a thorough investigation that, in the end, shows that the events of June and November cannot be credited entirely to one side or the other. This will undoubtedly call the GoE to account for these numbers and put pressure on the IIC to explain its findings and conclusion.
HUDDLESTON